

Supporting Minnesota's Youngest Citizens
lessons learned 2003–2006

minnesota
early



initiative



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We are the change we're looking for.

Only half of Minnesota's children enter kindergarten fully prepared. That fact has dire consequences for the future of our state.

Kids can't wait to learn. Between birth and age five the brain develops at a faster rate than at any other time in a person's life. We know that children with high quality early care and education have a better chance of succeeding in school and life. We need to ensure right now that all parents in Minnesota have the information they need and quality early education choices for their children.

This booklet is the story of six foundations and 64 coalitions that have begun turning the tide for Minnesota's youngest citizens—giving them the chance they deserve. It's a reminder of the power of grass-roots organizing, and proof that our commitment to the common good hasn't diminished one bit.

It's a tale of parents, businesses, nonprofits, educators, congregations, editors, health-care workers, police, human service providers, caregivers, and city council members. It's a tale about all of us, and our intimate connection to the lives of every small child in every Minnesota home. Looking into their eyes, we can glimpse the future we all want. But right now, it's up to us. It's in our hands. We are the change we're looking for.

Here's how to make it happen . . .

CREATING THE CLIMATE FOR CHANGE

Grass-roots organizing happens slowly, through one-on-one relationships. First, a few people see the need for change and get together. Pretty soon, they become 30 people. Then one community joins with another and now there are thousands of people and organizations contributing ideas, raising voices, taking on tasks, and recruiting others. Like drops of water collecting into a wave, small beginnings coalesce into an unstoppable social movement.

But someone has to create the right climate for that movement to grow, alerting people to the critical importance of children's early years and what this means to all of us, and—just as important—pointing to realistic solutions. Someone has to gather people and give them the information, the tools, and the encouragement to envision a better way.

FOUNDATIONS AS CATALYSTS AND COLLEAGUES

In 2003, thanks to a \$3.2 million grant from The McKnight Foundation, the six Minnesota Initiative Foundations were able to do just that by launching the Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative. The grant leveraged funding from others and was followed by another \$3 million from McKnight three years later.

The urgency of the early childhood issue brought together these six foundations for the

first major statewide collaboration in their 20-year history. They've become pioneers—establishing a meaningful role for communities in building a system that supports young children. Their success so far has made the initiative a model of large-scale grass-roots organizing.

First, each foundation picked a handful of communities in its region that were ready for action. The foundations supported research as residents in those communities gathered in small groups to explore what early care and education assets were already in place and where there was room for improvement. Once those communities got rolling, other communities were invited to join. The foundations kept everyone linked through proactive networks at all levels.

Local coordinators were hired in each community to be responsible for helping organize a grass-roots coalition. The foundations led coalitions through a visioning, planning, and evaluation process to ensure that the goals set and the actions planned reflected the thinking of each community in all its uniqueness and diversity.

COMMUNITY COALITIONS—A CAN-DO SPIRIT

Community forums and visioning meetings brought the widest possible range of voices into decision making. Out of those gatherings evolved action plans tailored to each community.

In the past year, the momentum to help every young Minnesota child thrive has grown from a

THE MINNESOTA INITIATIVE FOUNDATIONS HELP GUIDE EACH COALITION THROUGH THIS COMMUNITY ORGANIZING MODEL

- Build a diverse coalition; hire a coordinator
- Interview community members to determine strengths, opportunities, and perceptions
- Host a community “speak out” forum to discuss and raise awareness about early care and education
- Create a community early childhood vision
- Develop and implement an action plan with the support of local coalition task forces
- Sustain local efforts over time

OTHER SUPPORT FROM THE MINNESOTA INITIATIVE FOUNDATIONS

- 64 grass-roots coalitions established, and 275 early childhood project and program ideas implemented
- 70 community presentations about the economic impact of early childhood and the importance of business engagement
- 30 state and regional citizen advocacy workshops
- Regular meetings for coalition coordinators within and between regions to exchange ideas, share strategies, and participate in training
- Linkages between and among statewide organizations working on early care and education issues
- 85,000 copies of the *Getting School Ready in Minnesota Guide* distributed to parents, caregivers, and teachers

whisper to a roar. According to a state survey in January 2006, voters now place early care and education as a top priority. They understand how many children start kindergarten not fully prepared and how that loss will affect us all.

The list of changes that already have come out of the initiative—new programs, opportunities, events, curricula, funding sources, public awareness—is hard to believe. Together with partners like Ready 4 K, a statewide advocacy organization created to ensure that all Minnesota children are prepared for school success, the coalitions are building the grass-roots clout to influence public policy in Minnesota.

Oversight, direction, and support from the six foundations have been crucial, but at its core, the initiative is community-driven. This publication offers only a few snapshots from its panorama of accomplishments—examples that can guide others in rallying communities to support our youngest citizens.

In the past few years, the initiative has taught us many lessons. But if there’s one to remember, it’s this: never underestimate the resourcefulness and tenacity of ordinary people, especially when teamed with visionary foundations.

When they have the will, they always find the way.

“Helping little ones smoothly bridge the distance from their first teachers—their parents—to early childhood programs and, ultimately, kindergarten classrooms is an incredibly important first step we owe our youngsters.”

Diane Rauschenfels, Superintendent
Proctor School District

NORTHLAND FOUNDATION

THE HERMANTOWN/PROCTOR COALITION

CREATING A BETTER PATH TO KINDERGARTEN

Since when do early childhood experts make house calls? Since the Hermantown and Proctor school districts designed Providers as Partners in Education, an outreach program that sends early education teachers to home child care providers three times a year to model activities and offer mentorship. Among other things, the teachers help providers document children’s progress toward school readiness through a simple observation tool developed by the coalition. These observations are shared with parents, and can be forwarded to the elementary school principal to assist with classroom placement decisions.

“Providers as Partners in Education has provided the missing link for children moving from a home child care setting to kindergarten,” says Julie Fredrickson, coordinator of the Arrowhead region’s Child Care Resource and Referral program. “It helps families and providers feel connected to the education system from the time children first enter child care, which makes the transition to kindergarten virtually seamless.”

As effective as partners has proven—about 24 area providers already participate—it’s only one piece of the coalition’s efforts to prepare local four-year-olds for success in school. Another is Bridges to Kindergarten.

“Various school readiness efforts had been tried before in the two districts, but they’d never been aligned,” says Lori Fichtner, coalition coordinator. “The coalition’s organizing process,



Mother and daughter participate in Bridges to Kindergarten Math Night to sharpen math concepts through fun learning activities.

and particularly the Bridges to Kindergarten program, have pulled events and people together in a way that creates not only better opportunities for children but also better communication among child care providers, school staff, and parents.”

A great example is the coalition’s annual Kindergarten Forum, where a community panel of educators, social and health workers, and early child care experts answers parents’ questions about what is expected of a child in kindergarten, what a typical kindergarten day is like, what class options exist, and what can be done to build skills in children before kindergarten.

The forum is followed by other events for parents and children. On Math Night, they participate in activities that can be duplicated at home to improve math skills. A short parent information session explains what children

learn from such experiences and how those skills relate to school success. Literacy Night offers the same kind of experience, but in reading.

At an Early Childhood Art Fair, children play with various art media, while parents learn about the role of creativity and art exploration in their child’s development.

Bridges to Kindergarten also introduces parent education into early childhood screening for all three- and four-year-olds, often a family’s first contact with the school district. Parents receive a *Getting School Ready in Minnesota Guide*, and children are given a learning tool-kit with a welcome letter from the superintendent. Families with a child entering kindergarten in the next year are mailed a monthly *Getting School Ready* newsletter.

So far, parents of more than 40 percent of all four-year-olds in Hermantown and Proctor have taken part in Bridges to Kindergarten events. The program has made major strides in improving the relationship between kindergarten teachers and early care and education professionals, as well as between school districts and parents. Those links strengthen both the coalition and the community.

“Economic development is more than building smokestacks. We need to find other ways of preserving our leading edge economy. By investing in early childhood, we can build our greatest resource—human capital.”

Heidi Winter, Murray County
Economic Development Director

SOUTHWEST INITIATIVE FOUNDATION

THE MURRAY COUNTY COALITION

BUILDING WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIPS WITH BUSINESS

Murray County took to heart the findings in the 2003 Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis report on the economic impact of early childhood. The coalition understood how heavily local employers depend on the skills and the success of coming generations. The 300 businesses in the county have a lot to gain from improving the care and education of young children ... and a lot to give.

“The coalition didn’t ask anything right away from the business sector,” says Marilyn Carlson, a loan consultant at Centennial Mortgage in Slayton.

“Instead it offered us something—an invitation to a luncheon where Rob Grunewald, one of the writers of the Fed Reserve report, shared insights about the close connection between early childhood success and later success in the workforce. Forty people showed up, and the presentation really drew us in.”

At the same time, an extensive media campaign with local advertising, news stories, public service announcements, and billboards was running—reminding everyone in the county, including business owners, how crucial early childhood care and education are to our future.

Approaching business owners as colleagues rather than as funders, the coalition offered them participation in its new Family Friendly Business project, a recognition/incentive program. The coalition provides interested businesses a free



A child plays with Legos at the Willmar Early Childhood Expo: Connecting Families to Early Childhood Opportunities.

container of books for young children (to be placed in a lobby or a waiting area), a recognition plaque and a window sign. The plaque and the sign advertise the place as a Family Friendly Business—somewhere educational opportunities for young children are provided while parents conduct business.

"It has taken us quite a while to lay the groundwork for a mutually beneficial relationship with the business sector," says Dodi Haugen, coalition coordinator. "But it's been worthwhile. Businesses have begun calling me to ask how they can help, including financial resources. That has big implications for the long-term sustainability of the coalition's work."

That relationship building paid off when the coalition held its first annual fundraising event. "Jail and Bail," an imaginative strategy to attract

media attention as well as business and community financial support, was held on the courthouse lawn on the first day of the 2006 county fair. The coalition coordinator and community leaders volunteered to be sent to a mock "jail" because of their strong beliefs about the early childhood issue. To save them, businesses and county residents were asked to contribute "bail" money to the coalition.

Generous Jail and Bail contributions fund local projects that help young children have a healthy life of learning, achieving, and succeeding. Children win, and so do future employers.

“The early childhood coalition has co-sponsored a lot of community events over the past year that would not have ordinarily happened here in White Earth. Their leadership has made a real difference for all our families.”

Gary Padrta, Editor
Anishinaabeg Today newspaper

WEST CENTRAL INITIATIVE

THE COMMUNITY OF WHITE EARTH COALITION

WEAVING ART AND CULTURE INTO PARENT EDUCATION

“We’re learning how to keep our young children healthy—away from violence and drug abuse and interested in reading and learning,” says Donna Dakota, a White Earth parent. “Before, I didn’t understand what a big impact media violence has on little kids. I’m more careful now about what my children watch on TV.”

With a strong tradition of extended family, it’s no surprise that the White Earth coalition chose to focus on parenting education. The community is home to 450 Anishinabe (meaning “the original

people”), 250 of whom are young children. Family is a highly regarded, deeply felt value; grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles all participate in raising the children.

“We knew the more information and resources we could get in the hands of parents and other relatives, the brighter the future for every child—and for the community,” says Mary Leff, coalition coordinator. “We designed programs to support the culture of White Earth and encourage broad community participation. That often means using stories, art, dance, and music.”

The belief that art can teach is a thread running through many coalition efforts—a cultural play about a coyote, a magician who weaves self-esteem lessons into his act, a musical show, an outdoor kids concert, storytellers, and an acting troupe have all taught and entertained parents



The Community of White Earth Early Childhood Coalition's Celebrating Our Children parent event.

and children alike. Participants leave with greater understanding, and with “take homes” such as the coalition’s *Reservation Family Resource Guide*, free cultural books, and “Read to me” and “Let me read to you” t-shirts.

One unique and successful example of linking culture and art with parenting is the coalition’s Caring for Kids store. It’s the center of a community-wide incentive system to encourage parents to find the time to attend preschool events with their children, read to their children, attend parent trainings, and keep health appointments for their children.

White Earth elders have devoted part of their local craft shop to the store. They keep track of the store’s inventory (necessities like laundry soap, diapers, etc.) and donate handmade items for new babies. Parents shop at the store

by redeeming points given by a participating program, school, or agency.

The popularity of the store with new parents has led to an increase in their participation in early childhood programs like child care, Head Start, and Even Start, while increasing elder involvement with young children and community awareness of the elders’ crafts.

The coalition’s programs are not only artistic, but holistic. From large conferences to smaller storytelling hours, parents receive information, resources, and entertainment, as well as a shared meal and free care for younger children. Coalition events reinforce both cultural and community bonds.

“Quality child care is a cornerstone of early childhood care and education. By providing a safe environment that stimulates young minds and nurtures emotional development, child care providers protect the most important resource this country has: children.”

Amy Jo Bur, Pastor
St. James United Methodist Church

SOUTHERN MINNESOTA INITIATIVE FOUNDATION

THE WATONWAN COUNTY COALITION

STRENGTHENING THE QUALITY OF CHILD CARE

In St. James—a rural school district with a large population of teen parents, and where 83 percent of families are in the lowest income categories, 45 percent of children are children of color, and about half of all parents have only a high school education—it’s worth inquiring why young children recently scored higher than the state average on kindergarten readiness skills.

Part of the reason for that achievement—and similar ones in neighboring districts—is the support the Watonwan County coalition has

given to the area’s 29 home- and center-based child care providers.

“We’ve been able to make a paradigm shift here by including child care providers as an integral part of our whole 0–5 support system,” says Sue Harris, coalition coordinator. “They’ve been involved as decision makers and participants in both the coalition and its range of educational offerings.”

One early, powerful gesture by the coalition was simply to thank child care providers for the important role they play in the developmental process.

During Child Care Appreciation Week in 2005, every provider in the county received a child care “Thank You” basket filled with curricula, books, art supplies, and more—personally delivered by a coalition member. In 2006, all



An assistant teacher and two students at Noah's Ark Preschool/Child Care Center in Madelia.

providers were invited to a free evening “Thank You” meal that included free training with CEU credits. They were given a free curriculum resource of their choice, as well as certificates and “Kids Are My Business” pins which were handed out by county commissioners. Local media even covered the event.

“The coalition has worked hand-in-hand with the child care professionals of this county,” says Jennie Firchau, a local child care provider for 14 years. “They listened to our concerns and ideas, and most of all validated the work we do with our children. For years, we’ve had little if any voice on a county or state level, but now we’re recognized. They helped us get our voice back!”

To encourage providers to seek further training in child development, the coalition and the Child Care Resource and Referral agency sponsored informational meetings with representatives from

local colleges and the T.E.A.C.H./R.E.E.T.A.I.N. program for child care providers interested in additional training, higher education, and certification. As a result, nearly half of the providers in the county expressed interest in enrolling in one of these options. That alone is a leap forward.

In another effort to support providers, the coalition developed a series of 52 preschool Early Learning Fun curriculum packets that include a children’s book and activity guide. Ten of the book packets are also published in Spanish to serve the county’s large Hispanic population. Packets are distributed to child care centers and homes when the Watonwan County children’s librarian visits monthly to provide story time and book lending services. Each packet contains enrichment activity ideas that promote early literacy and address all aspects of development. The full set of packets is also available through the library system, and has become very popular with parents and grandparents.

“A good education for children today means a brighter future for them tomorrow, and a stronger, healthier society and economy for everyone.”

Betsy Wergin, Minnesota State Senator

INITIATIVE FOUNDATION

THE PRINCETON AREA COALITION

GETTING EARLY CHILDHOOD ON THE PUBLIC AGENDA

“We didn’t know about the early childhood initiative until we showed up at Princeton’s Tuesdays in the Park concerts this summer,” say Tim Mackenzie and his wife, Tina. “The coalition and the library started a story time for young children right before the concert. We got free children’s books for our son and daughter, and information on early literacy. Now we take our kids every week.”

That’s just one of the quality early childhood opportunities the Princeton coalition is becoming known for offering. “We just don’t go away,”

says coalition coordinator Sue Hix. “We’re always doing, co-sponsoring, or planning something. We keep appearing over and over again in the community.”

Hix isn’t exaggerating; the nonstop creativity behind the coalition’s efforts stretches beyond Princeton all the way to St. Paul. Coalition members have involved their state legislators in nearly every major activity they’ve sponsored, including a legislative booth at the big annual Early Childhood Fair and a tea party highlighting the early childhood scene in Princeton. In turn, the legislators were influential in bringing the bi-partisan Early Childhood Caucus to town for a community forum.

“Princeton is leading the way when it comes to advocacy in Greater Minnesota,” says Todd Otis, president of the advocacy organization Ready 4 K. “They’ve participated in rallies at the



Two young children learning to love books at Princeton's story time.

Capitol and in advocacy trainings, and they were the first to develop a calling tree to make local citizens aware of important times to contact their legislators. We now envision calling trees like that being created across the state."

Princeton has been just as inventive when it comes to staying on the local radar. Strongly supported by the local community education department, the coalition was among the first to develop and promote an online directory of existing early childhood resources. Members created a community story-writing/illustration contest for all ages, publishing many of the works on their website. They distributed "Thank You" baskets filled with coupons, information, a survey, and kids' craft items to local child care providers.

Coalition members have developed effective working relationships with local reporters,

educating them on early childhood issues and earning column inches in the process. They've used paid advertising and the communication networks of local organizations effectively, too. They recently co-sponsored a Dads and Kids Celebration, and have regularly appeared at popular annual events like the Chamber of Commerce's Pork Chop Picnic, the Business Expo, and even the town's Santaville event in December.

Thanks to the community's dedicated coalition—families, service providers, and early childhood advocates are now familiar with the many early childhood resources available to the area's 1,700 youngest citizens, and are working together to address unmet needs.

“The initiative’s early-literacy programs are a great investment in the kids that will become tomorrow’s hiring pool. We need to prepare children early for future opportunities if we’re going to remain competitive.”

Diane Retka, Workers’ Compensation
Administrator, Arctic Cat Inc.

NORTHWEST MINNESOTA FOUNDATION

THE THIEF RIVER FALLS COALITION

GUIDING CHILDREN INTO THE WORLD OF WORDS

“When we hear the excitement of child care providers, parents, and preschool and kindergarten staff—we know our Building Language Together [BLT] program is being used, and those using it are learning,” says Jill Johnson, coalition coordinator. “Our people have been hungry for resources to help prepare young children to read. BLT is just what they’ve been looking for.”

BLT, based on early-literacy methods developed by faculty at Harvard University, is a set of 21 books with scripts for parents and care providers,

combined with training sessions on how to use them. The kit uses open-ended questions to lead young children to higher levels of language and thinking skills—helping them learn new words, better comprehend what they hear and see, and recognize letters and the sounds associated with them.

“This is an ideal strategy for this community,” says Susie Olson, a local kindergarten teacher and coalition member. “It supports the school district’s goal of improving student reading scores, and it helps preschool programs like Head Start and Early Childhood Family Education strengthen their partnership with parents. Those relationships are so important.”

The coalition first offered free BLT training sessions to preschool staff, then to parents of four-year-olds, then to child care providers. If providers attended all three sessions during



Preschool-aged children engaged in a story read by their childcare provider using the Building Language Together method.

the year, they were given a free set of the books and scripts—worth \$250 each—to use in their care settings. Parents can check the books and scripts out from their preschools and providers.

As an offshoot of these trainings, preschool staff members offered free training to the staff of Dakota Clinic, a large medical system in Thief River Falls. The clinic purchased BLT kits for 12 of their offices to promote literacy development with parents and children while they wait during appointments.

In the past two years, half of Thief River Falls' 61 child care providers have attended the trainings. Over the next two years, the coalition hopes to expand the trainings to remaining preschool and child care center staff as well as to home providers and legally unlicensed providers. Also in the works are partnerships with the library system and with other health-care centers, and a

tracking system to measure the results of BLT once children enter school.

Already, the Building Language Together program reaches nearly two-thirds of the 850 young children in Thief River Falls, many of whom would have had little or no formal literacy programming as part of their child care. The program makes access more equal, and that means local children will all have a running start at success in kindergarten.

KEY LESSONS

► START AT THE GRASS ROOTS

There's no overnight way to advance a cause like early care and education. You need to rely on tried-and-true community organizing that is inclusive and participatory—and sometimes slow. It takes time to reach, inform, and enlist the help of community members. But in return you get passionate volunteers who stay committed over the long term.

► CAST A WIDE NET

The most effective grass-roots coalitions are built from a wide community cross section. When you gather business people, elected officials, the faith community, educators, parents, caregivers, social service providers, media, and others to work together on behalf of young children, you gain an amazing wealth of knowledge, expertise, and contacts. This diversity also is a big asset in helping move a coalition more quickly from vision to action.

► USE PAID LOCAL COORDINATORS

To succeed at community organizing, every coalition needs a local coordinator whose specific job it is to move the work forward. Other local leaders also are key to building momentum, but a part-time coordinator is critical. Communities that have made the best progress in keeping early childhood issues on the public agenda and sustaining local energy have all employed designated coordinators.

► THINK BIG BUT START SMALL

A smaller, short-term project can jump-start coalitions. Such projects range from organizing family fun days and story times to offering parent education sessions and children's health screenings. With one or two smaller successes under their belts, coalitions are more confident and better prepared to tackle bigger systemic change. Small projects can also provide bursts of coalition visibility that help raise public awareness.

► CREATE AND USE NETWORKS

All kinds of networks are necessary in building coalition strength and reach, but regional and statewide networks of coalition coordinators are especially effective. These not only provide a forum for sharing information and best practices but also serve as a critical tool in organizing common public policy strategies.

► ALLOCATE ENOUGH TIME AND RESOURCES

Creating a social movement to change policy and systems takes a lot of time, energy, and resources. This is a process, so results seldom happen quickly. Coalitions need ongoing technical assistance, training opportunities, and support to maintain inspired leadership and community participation.

These coalitions encompass over 165 communities and 51 of the 80 Greater Minnesota counties.



A pie chart showing the distribution of responses for the question 'How many people do you know who have been in a relationship with a person with a mental health problem?'. The chart is divided into nine segments of different colors, each labeled with a percentage. The segments are: 21% (teal), 24% (green), 20% (pink), 3% (blue), 15% (orange), 5% (red), 6% (purple), 6% (yellow), and 6% (light blue).

Percentage
21%
24%
20%
3%
15%
5%
6%
6%
6%

- ☐ Parent
- ☐ Business & Community/
Economic Development
- ☐ Early Childhood Care
& Education
- ☐ Elected Officials
& Law Enforcement
- ☐ K-12 & Higher Education
- ☐ Faith Community
- ☐ Health Care/Public Health/
Social Services
- ☐ Other

LEARN MORE, GET INVOLVED For more information about the initiative or to get involved, please contact one of the six Minnesota Initiative Foundations listed below.

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